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## Who Does the Selecting at Your Library?

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# Against the Grain

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"Linking Publishers, Vendors and Librarians"

## Who Does the Selecting at Your Library?

by **Audrey Fenner** (Head, Acquisition Department, Jackson Library, University of North Carolina Greensboro, 1000 Spring Garden Street, Greensboro, NC 27402; Phone 336-256-1193; Fax 336-334-4731) <fafenner@uncg.edu>

Most acquisitions librarians probably have had this question put to them by eager telemarketers intent on reaching someone who can agree then and there to make a purchase. The answer to the question is seldom as easy as giving one or two names. Selection for academic library collections may be done by librarians, by teaching faculty, or by representatives of both groups.

Responsibility for selection may favor one or the other of two extremes: either librarians do the selecting, or teaching faculty are asked to shoulder the responsibility. Between these extremes are varying ways and means of assigning and sharing selection duties. A liaison system is often used: faculty representatives of the academic departments work in conjunction



with librarians designated as liaisons with their departments. Sometimes a faculty committee shares selection work. Obviously the model chosen will vary with the type of institution served. Large, well-funded libraries have the resources to acquire a good percentage of currently published materials and enough librarians on staff to serve as subject bibliographers. Small libraries may struggle with a limited materials budget and their personnel may be stretched to provide basic services.

**Raven Fonfa** describes a shift from faculty to librarian control of materials selection as a factor in the professionalization of librarianship. Collection development, says **Fonfa**, has come to be seen as an activity central to library operations, and one that is rightly the responsibility of library professionals. By the mid-1960s, librarian control of selection was an accepted practice in American academic libraries.<sup>1</sup>

In theory, collection development librarians work as full-time subject bibliographers concentrating on one discipline or a group of subjects. In practice it is much more common that librarians combine collection development duties with other library work. This entails difficulties, as discussed by **Robert Sorgenfrei** and **Christo-**

**pher Hooper-Lane**. Besides staffing the reference desk, reference librarians carry out bibliographic instruction sessions, perform searches for patrons, and prepare instructional materials. In recent years tasks have been added: managing access to electronic resources, serving as Webmasters, providing email or online chat reference services. Much of an overtaxed reference librarian's work becomes "reactive," according to these writers, carried out in direct response to patrons' needs and requests. Collection development work seems less pressing and may be postponed.<sup>2</sup>

Some see selection by librarians only as the ideal means of acquiring a balanced collection. **Ian D. Gordon**, writing in a Canadian context, calls on librarians to reclaim an active role in selection. He states that librarians are "best suited to perform this function" and "have the subject

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## If Rumors Were Horses

Hope you all saw the awesome pictures of the fabulous women **Audrey Melkin** (Ingenta) and **Ann Okerson** (Yale) on the cover of **Library Journal** March 15! Audrey and Ann were pictured along with **Vince Price** (ProQuest), **Steven Bell** (Philadelphia University), **Peter McCracken** (Serials Solutions and U. of Washington), **Sam Brooks** (Ebsco Information Services), **Diane Smith** (LexisNexis) and **John Barnes**



(Gale Group). The discussion was all about aggregators!

Tracked down the wonderful **Janet Fisher** <janetfi@rcn.com> the other day. She's in Boston, doing some project work for several different clients. You'll remember that Janet left **MIT Press** for **Cartref Science** which abruptly closed operation. Anyway, she's located at 39 Harrington Street, Watertown,

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**Who Does the Selecting ...**  
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expertise, skills, resources, and a familiarity with collection development issues." Gordon makes unsupported claims that "Most faculty are indifferent to library collection development issues," and "Most faculty are willing to relinquish their responsibility [for collection development] if they are given an opportunity to remain active and equal participants." Just how faculty who "relinquish their responsibility" are to participate is not made clear beyond the statement, "Librarians, when working in a consultative relationship with faculty, are in the best position to shape and build library resources."

Such a "consultative relationship" would necessarily involve librarians working as liaisons with teaching faculty. Such a system is used at Jackson Library, **University of North Carolina Greensboro**. Liaison librarians here have a considerable degree of responsibility. They order from departmental library funds, examine notification slips, and undertake retrospective collection development. They may write and revise statements of collection policy, work on collection analysis projects, or prepare accreditation reports. They assist in defining approval plan profiles, examine approval books on a regular and frequent basis, and assist with evaluation and modification of approval plans.

Communication between librarians and faculty may be hindered by differing percep-

tions of collection development and its importance to the library and the academic institution. These differences of perception become a real problem for the library if teaching faculty do all of the selection of library materials. A decision to depend heavily upon faculty selectors may be justified by institutional policy: the sole purpose of the collection is defined as the support of instructional and faculty research needs. Developing balance and broad coverage in a collection, filling gaps and amending weaknesses, may be perceived as being outside the library's purview and a misuse of nonetoo-plentiful funds.


**Robert Neville,  
James Williams and  
Caroline C. Hunt**

list common methods of faculty ordering that perpetuate lack of balance in a collection: first come-first served, per-person budget allotments, and selection from *Choice* cards or other pre-printed forms. They speak of restricting "impulse ordering" of single titles by individual faculty and recommend planning strategies to counteract the tendency toward imbalance. For example, they suggest looking at academic departments and disciplines as a continuum, with the library-dependent humanities at one end and the sciences, particularly computer science, at the other. In working with a department that has little faculty involvement with the library, **Neville, Williams and Hunt** advise giving the library liaison greater responsibility for selection while also relying on an approval plan. They point out a need for better selection of liaisons by academic departments, more relevant training of faculty liaisons, and better recognition of their work. The onus is on the library to address these questions, by meeting with department chairs, by providing orientation sessions for faculty, and by finding ways of showing appreciation to faculty liaisons. "A volunteer workforce of faculty," they say, "an economic necessity for small and medium-sized academic libraries, can provide much of the expertise that larger, research-oriented institutions would get from specialized subject bibliographers."<sup>4</sup>

While budget or personnel shortages may force the issue of calling upon faculty to volunteer as selectors, the prevailing opinion is

that teaching faculty can and should play a major part in selection. The ideal system, then, would seem to be a cooperative one, with both librarians and teaching faculty bearing part of the responsibility. Librarians must be flexible enough to work with selection procedures that vary within disciplines and across academic departments.

For selectors, whether librarians or teaching faculty, knowledge of the literature is essential. Certainly it is necessary to keep up with newly published output. Familiarity with collection development processes and tools is also important, and this is generally acquired through practice rather than training. This writer remembers a business department at one institution that hired an adjunct instructor on a one-year contract each academic year and routinely appointed that person as its library representative. The psychology department at the same institution always assigned the task to its newest faculty member, enabling the others to rid themselves of a task they considered unwelcome. One of these novice selectors naively supposed that she had been chosen for a special honor. In neither department was there an understanding of the need for continuity, for appointing as liaisons people familiar with the existing collection who had developed an understanding of collection development issues. The library also erred in this situation, expecting faculty representatives to function as one-way conduits of information. They were "liaisons" in name only as no librarians were appointed to work with them on any regular basis.

Collection development is a process continually in flux as acquisitions budgets remain static or shrink, as academic programs and policies change, and as administrators call for accountability in spending. It is important that librarians do not allow themselves to be driven either by lack of time or by budgetary constraints into abrogating their responsibilities for developing sound collections. By involving both librarians and teaching faculty in selection, in ways that vary with times and situations, effective systems of collection-building can be put into practice. Once in place, these systems require re-thinking, evaluation and adjustment to retain their effectiveness. 

**Endnotes**

1. Raven Fonfa, "From faculty to librarian materials selection: an element in the professionalization of librarianship," in *Leadership and academic librarians* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1998), 22-36.
2. Sorgenfrei, Robert and Hooper-Lane, Christopher. "Book selection responsibilities for the reference librarian: professional benefit or burden?" *Library Collections, Acquisitions, & Technical Services* 25 (Summer 2001): 171-178.
3. Gordon, Ian D. "Asserting our collection development roles: academic librarians must take responsibility for the collection." *College & Research Libraries News* 61 (Spring 2000): 687-689.
4. Neville, Robert, Williams, James, and Hunt, Caroline C. "Faculty-library teamwork in book ordering." *College & Research Libraries* 59 (November 1998): 524.